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Baudrillard's simulated ecology

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Abstract. Jean Baudrillard, the scholar and critic of postmodernity, struggled with questions of postmodern ontology: representation of the real through the semiotic process of signification is threatened with the rise of simulacra, the simulated real. With this rise, seductive semiotic relationships between signs replace any traditional ontological representamen. This struggle has implications for environmentalism since the problems of contemporary environmental philosophy are rooted in problems with ontology. Hence the question of postmodern ecology: can the natural survive postmodern simulation? Baudrillard's communicative analysis of semiotic postmodernity can both support and extend ecosemiotic theses in response to these questions, questions that must be answered in order to explore our paradoxical understandings of the natural and confirm an understanding of environmentalism for postmodernity. In this paper I will argue for the merit of a semiotic understanding of postmodernity, develop the idea of ecology in this context, and then compare Baudrillard's approach to the contemporary development of ecosemiotics.

Keywords: ecosemiotics, environmentalism, postmodern turn

To speak of ecology is to attest to the death and total abstraction of nature [...] The great signified, the great referent Nature, is dead, replaced by environment, which simultaneously designates and designs its death and the restoration of nature as simulation model (its 'reconstitution,' as one says of orange juice that has been dehydrated). (Baudrillard 1981: 201)

Jean Baudrillard's critical theory struggled with questions of postmodern ontology. With the rise of the simulated real, seductive semiotic relationships between signs replace the traditional ontological significance of the signified real. In many ways,

the problems of contemporary environmental philosophy are, at root, problems with ontology. Our decisions regarding conservation and preservation are based upon rules established by our ontological frameworks. In Baudrillard's critical analysis of the postmodern condition, systems of signs – the various webs of interpreted representations normally of real objects – lose this connection in postmodernity and become simulacra, signs without real referents.¹ He extends this analysis of semiotic *communication* to the problem of a simulated, pasteurized natural world thereby providing a framework that can help us trace the problems inherent in contemporary approaches to ecology and environmental value. Likewise, ecosemiotics seeks to understand ecological relationships in terms of semiotic *signification*, critiquing the modernist understanding of Nature. The relationship between communication and signification is one of focus.

Communication, defined as a sign process which involves a sender and receiver, occurs not only among humans, but also between all other organisms throughout the whole biosphere. Not only cultural semiotics but also bio- and zoosemiotics are hence concerned with processes of communication. *Signification*, by contrast, which concerns sign processes without a sender, predominates in ecosemiotics, where organisms interact with a natural environment that does not function as the intentional emitter of messages to the interpreting organism. (Nöth 2001: 72)

While ecosemiotics is concerned with environmental semiotic relations whereas Baudrillard's own analysis is more fundamentally anthropocentric, the latter offers us vital insight into the negotiation and exploration of postmodern natural ecology.

1. Semiotic postmodernity

Baudrillard's semiotic postmodernity poses a dilemma between communication and signification. On the one hand, the human environment is that of semiosis, or sign communication. Baudrillard (1981: 200) notes: "[...] our true environment is the universe of communication. It is in this that it differs radically from the 19th century concepts of 'nature' [...]. While these latter referred to physical, biological [...] or 'socio-cultural' [...] laws, environment is from the beginning a network of messages and signs, its laws being those of communication." But, on the other hand, that same environment is built around signification within physical and biological Nature. The dilemma is thus: what is the relationship between the natural physical environment and the human semiotic communicative environment? In

¹ According to Gary Genosko (1994: xviii), "if one understands postmodernity in terms of this abject semiotic condition, then Baudrillard is an anti-semiological and an anti-postmodern thinker".

posing the question, the dilemma itself suggests a fundamental shift in contemporary natural ontology toward a semiotic ontology.

Despite whatever controversy concerning the origination of the “postmodern condition”, the continued development of our use and misuse of Nature, both as real and conceptual object, is certainly central to the development of this cultural and critical condition. The postmodern turn seems to destroy this ethical relationship by deconstructing the essential metaphysical relationships between the object and the subject and, therefore, the ethical relationships built upon this metaphysic. John Deely (2001: xxx) writes of postmodernity: “If there is one notion that is central to the emerging postmodern consciousness, that notion is the notion of sign.” Deely’s position in *The Four Ages of Understanding* makes a strong claim not to a definition of postmodernity but rather to its most essential characteristic. Following Deely, let us take the postmodern condition as that asserting the metaphysical primacy of the sign relation over the subject/object relation. Sign relations are a form of sign-mediated phenomenal experiences. Rather than a subject directly experiencing, an interpretant makes meaning from representations: it is the way of the sign over the way of ideas. In the critical postmodern theory of the later Baudrillard we find a reaction to this same semiotic conception of postmodernism, the “immense process of the destruction of meaning, equal to the earlier destruction of appearances” (Baudrillard 1994a: 161). Deely’s description of postmodernity neglects the destructive potential of signification that is, for Baudrillard, the *fin de siècle* of postmodernity. But while critical of the destructive potential of semiotic postmodernity, Baudrillard remains open to the complicated possibility of an environmental perspective *within* a simulated ecology.

Baudrillard critiques postmodernity for its simulation of the real. David Chandler (2002: 80) writes that “[...] Jean Baudrillard interprets many representations as a means of concealing the *absence of reality*; he calls these representations ‘simulacra’ (or copies without originals) [...]”. Baudrillard (1994a: 6) writes that the representation of the real comes in successive phases: “[I]t is the reflection of a profound reality, it masks and denatures a profound reality, it masks the *absence* of a profound reality, it has no relation to any reality whatsoever. It is its own pure simulacrum.” This ordering, exemplary of Baudrillard’s conception of the postmodern condition, asserts that it is not possible for the postmodernist to distinguish between signs and the objects that they represent. In this order “[t]he entire edifice of representation, implying a logic in which images are yoked to a pre-imaged foundation, falters. The so-called postmodern scene is the ruin of representation” (Genosko 2007).² Baudrillard (1994a: 6) writes of the end of this succession of

² Genosko 2007 originally appeared in *SemiotiX: A Global Information Bulletin* (Issue 9), May 2007 (<http://www.semioticon.com/semiotix/semiotix9/sem-9-02.html>) and can be accessed at http://www.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies/vol4_3/v4-3-article15-genosko.html.

simulation in his *Simulacra and Simulation* noting: "when the real is no longer what it was [...] there is a plethora of myths of origin and of signs of reality – a plethora of truth [...] and authenticity." This fourth phase, the rise of the simulacrum, is the *refraction* of representation. This, Baudrillard's early critique of the problem of the semiotic, forms the basis for his critique of postmodern or semiotic ecology.

2. Semiotic ecology

The problem for postmodern environmentalism develops from precisely this refractive potential: the human environment as ecological no longer represents Nature but rather *signifies* it by the simulacra. When pioneer environmentalist Aldo Leopold first published "The land ethic", he described the disconnection between the human animal and his natural world. As Leopold (1968: 223–224) wrote, our "true modern is separated from the land by many middlemen, and by innumerable physical gadgets" and "[...] has no vital relation to it" (Leopold 1968: 224). Leopold's paradigm was marked by the continuous and unimpeded flourishing of this mechanical or technological separation from our ecological relationships. For Baudrillard (1994b: 80), too, "[t]he modern discovery of nature consists in its liberation as energy and in a mechanical transformation of the world." It has "always wagered on infinite natural resources, on an incalculable horizon of material energies – the modern definition of energy being that it only demands to be 'liberated' (the 'liberation' of human beings and all of their faculties follows the same model)" (Baudrillard 2010: 64–65). The modernist's technological manipulation of the land placed the interpretant of mechanism between him and his natural environment. Beyond this level of signification, the *postmodernist* is "liberated" or separated from the land by many layered levels of signification and as having no relation to the land at all: the natural, for the semiotic animal, threatens to become mere simulation. So from the ashes of this mechanical transformation rises the phoenix of postmodernism. The problem for postmodern environmentalism falls from precisely this purported difference between the natural and the semiotic: the human environment no longer equates to traditional natural ecology. For, "[s]ign value [...] issues an ontology which is both essentialist and at the same time fluid, plural, multiple" (Grace 2000: 23). Natural ecology is simply one system of signs – environments – among others in the postmodern world and this disparate amplification of signs does not rely any longer on a real object as the source of its ontological significance.

This disparate amplification of signs does not rely any longer on a real object as the source of its ontological significance. "Environment is a designed semio-aesthetic form for the circulation of signifiers disconnected from their referents" (Genosko 1994: 127). Ecosemiotics, the study of this problem of signification for

ecology, faces a two-part struggle. On the one hand, it must struggle to make the natural once again central to the human communicative environment in order for an environmental or green movement to have any functional foundation. On the other hand, ecosemiotics must deprioritize or shift the anthropocentric understanding of sign systems as *communication* toward a bio- or eco-centric model of *signification* more broadly. However, how can a necessarily anthropocentric semiotic make this shift toward signification without losing its own meaning in the process? How can an ecosemiotic approach, faced with postmodern simulation, negotiate between signification and communication?

3. The ecosemiotic lacuna

This problem can be made visible by the analysis of ecosemiotics. Kalevi Kull (1998: 350) defines ecosemiotics as “the semiotics of relationships between nature and culture” that “deals with the semiosis going on between a human and its ecosystem [...]”. But, for postmodernity, this ecosystem has no reality apart from the communicative sign systems that designate its boundaries. It is the anthropocentric ontology of signs. Toward this effect Kull (1998: 351) goes on to write: “The semiotic aspect of man-nature relationships may concern, for instance, the context-dependence of the valuation of nature [...]. And it certainly concerns the formation of nature, the designing and building of the environment using the human [...] forms”. If, as John Deely suggests, postmodernism is the redistribution of the modern subject/object distinction into distinctions between systems of signs, then the modernist conception of Nature as such becomes environment; that is, ecology becomes mere environment. Nature loses its central place as signified real object in the world and, instead, joins the ranks of an army of possible signifieds, of possible environments. This is at once the power and the curse of the postmodern turn: powerful because it destructs the naïve and sacred idealism of Nature, accursed because it threatens to lose sight of morally and scientifically responsible ecology in the forest of relativism. As Victoria Grace (2000: 17) noted: “[...] ‘nature’ provided the reference point as object against which ‘man’ could register as subject”. The difference between Nature and its environments is subsumed under the ontologically independent sign. Kull (1998: 345), too, recognizes this difficulty, writing: “If this means that an ideal relationship with non-idealised nature (i.e., with natural nature, with wilderness) is impossible, then it imposes strong limits on the attempts of the green movement, on ecological ideals”. Environmentalism is forced to assume a new teleology in response to these limits to its original end. Following the analysis of the human being as both a semiotic and semiotic organism, we are forced to comprehend that which environmentalism seeks to preserve not only in terms of biological

nature as systems of signification but also as cultural ecology, or an environment built solely on the communicative relationships between senders and receivers.

Baudrillard's succession of representation – reflecting, denaturing, masking, and refracting – parallel four levels of signification of nature offered in Kull's ecosemiotic analysis. Expanding beyond the distinction between first nature, that level not recognizing human influence, and second nature, the nature constructed by humans, Kull points to two other levels of signification. The deepest ecological level, zero nature, is “nature itself (e.g., absolute wilderness)” (Kull 1998: 355). We can read zero nature as not only unchanged but also unrecognized by and inaccessible to the human semiosphere. It is the modernist Nature understood in post-modern terms; that is, as purely and merely conceptual. Kull's “zero nature” parallels Baudrillard's “profound reality” (Baudrillard 1994a: 6) epistemically, since we can have no direct access to knowledge of it. First nature is that nature which we recognize and interpret as semiotically representing the natural: a direct parallel to Baudrillard's reflecting phase. First nature is the first semiotically rich referent – the nature built of objects as they represent themselves to and/or are interpreted by us. Second nature is that which we have materially translated. Built environments such as parks, homes, and cities are included here but also and more fundamentally any natural object manipulated by human culture; that is, potentially *all* of nature. Second nature *denatures* Nature as a pure referent. Third nature is the representation of nature in art and science: the “virtual nature” (Kull 1998: 355) of nature documentarians like David Attenborough, authors of literature, or manipulators of pixels.³ This “virtual nature” offers a mask that allows us to see Nature despite its absence. The semiosis of and between these four spheres of natural signification is at the root of the problem of postmodern ecology.

Kull, in his 1998 article on semiotic ecology, paints a very idyllic vision of the orders of nature from his back porch where he recognizes the existence of these four “orders” of nature:

All four natures are here, as I write this on the open balcony of my summer cottage in the south Estonian forests, in a place which is far more distant from the towns and roads than Walden. Zero nature lives its life in every leaf and blade, and in the forests behind the trees, and in the soil with the earthworms. First nature is all the green I see, the birds that sing and dragonflies and the big spider in the upper corner of the balcony keeping its leg on the web. Second nature is all of our garden, and well, and smoke sauna, but also a great deal of the forest, since I know that it is growing on the old pastures and meadows which were abandoned nearly sixty years ago; also, in this forest, some of the

³ For an excellent discussion of examples of the masking of “Nature” by such documentations or images, see Elliot 2006: 205–216.

trees were cut to give the others more space to grow. And third nature is all this nature on the screen of laptop, and in my theoretical constructions, and in the book my daughter is reading. (Kull 1998: 356)

On this reading Kull recognizes the existence and also epistemic inaccessibility of Nature, the real referent. Parallelling Baudrillard's analysis, Kull describes the nature we do know as semiotically mediated. We can see, however, that Baudrillard develops a critical position against third nature that Kull does not. The problem that Kull's analysis appears to overlook is that third nature, a system of signification that traditionally *represents* zero nature, has the potential instead to *simulate* zero nature and, in so doing, to destroy its relationship to the other orders. The referent of the orders of nature, Nature itself, has lost its place of ontological centrality and, so, the conceptualization of nature as ordered from more to less "real", objective, or Natural also loses its ontological significance. The simulation of "wild" Nature fundamentally – and perhaps *necessarily* – alters our conception of first nature: the nature we see is a pure simulacrum of the Nature that once was; one now divorced from its object. It is this important analysis of the simulacrum that Baudrillard's critique offers ecosemiotics.

Baudrillard's simulacrum threatens to completely subsume Nature under its own signification – its reproduction. Environmentalists, then, are fighting to preserve a mere simulacrum of Nature. Put another way, as we have seen, the metaphysical subject/object distinction that supports the "green" effort, as traditionally conceived, is destroyed by the rise of the postmodern semiotic. As Paul Hegarty (2004: 123) so succinctly noted, "Nature [...] is disappearing. This is because culture [...] is taking over the world". Environmental conservation in postmodernity cannot point to a single ecological goal – Nature, the natural – from an ontologically objective real referent in the world. That which green movements seek to conserve no longer exists, ontologically, in the world in the same way – or in the same relationship to us – that it did under the modern paradigm. In fact, Baudrillard (1994a: 83–84) later argues, the "frenzy for ecological conservation [...] is really more to do with nostalgia and remorse [...]" rather than self preservation or any sort of moral requirement. The environment of the semiotic animal is dependent on the specifically human quality of semiotic as opposed to merely semiosis interpretation.

The end of Nature is brought about by the restructuring of the natural into the semiotic. The danger in replacing Nature with environment in the postmodern semiotic condition, it would seem, is that it upsets the balance between the subject, the human being, against its natural object, the natural world. "The 'balance' we hear so much of in ecology ('out of balance') is not so much that of planetary resources and their exploitation as the metaphysical one between subject and object" (Baudrillard 1994b: 81).

4. Simulated ecology: some concluding remarks

We have seen that the simulation of Nature has been a ramification of the semiotic postmodern condition. We have also seen that this simulation endangers the traditional teleology of the environmentalist. The only question remains: is the death or end of Nature necessary, given the postmodern condition? Ecosemioticians argue no: despite the deconstruction of the Grand Narrative of Nature in-itself, natural and ecological ends are still accessible. The fundamental insight of ecosemiotics is that, despite semiotic mediation, science – that empirical process of verifiable observation – remains open to us. We can come to know the processes of nature through the study of signification amongst natural entities. According to Winfried Nöth (1998: 333) “Ecosemiotics will be study in sign processes that is not restricted to arbitrary and artificial signs. It will also, and perhaps primarily, be concerned with natural signs mediating between the organism and its environment”. Thus the natural survives – and thrives – in postmodernity. But Baudrillard, on the other hand, certainly seems to think that the breakdown of the subject/object relation is final. To that effect he writes: “One cannot at the same time grasp the real and its sign: we shall never again master the two simultaneously” (Baudrillard 2003: 77). This breakdown pushes the limits of a system built upon modern metaphysical foundations and shows the inevitable end of the traditional environmental movement. The ecological effort in struggle against the subsumption of the real by the sign will be extinguished with the fall of the modern metaphysic to the rise of the semiological conditions of postmodernity.

Given this critical insight by Baudrillard, we might assume that a return, so to speak, to a modern conception of the ontological relationship of Nature to the human being is impossible. If we agree with Kull that the semiotization of nature necessitates the building of successive phases of simulation of nature, we look to the possibility, within this context, of a relationship less harmful to biodiversity and the goals of the “environmental movement”. “Semiotic ecology is extended ecology,” Kull (1998: 363) writes, “with a change in its philosophical and methodological assumptions”. The environmental movement and ecosemiotics stand in a symbiotic relationship. The evolution of postmodern ecology will be driven by the postmodern semiotic metaphysic, fighting to assert signification of “nature” as essential to survival of the semiosphere; and against getting mired in the relativism of myriad simulacral representations, the project of ecosemiotics is the justification of scientifically-appropriate representations.

Following Baudrillard's critical position toward the ramifications of the semiotic shift, some contemporary environmental ethicists such as Mark Rowlands have already begun to affirm this shift in a positive way. The self-stated purpose of Rowlands' *The Environmental Crisis* is to show why “for the purposes of developing a satisfactory environmental ethic, we need to break down the subject/object

distinction" (Rowlands 2000: ix). Rowlands' ultimate goal of "*pulling the mind into the world*" (Rowlands 2000: 10), as opposed to the inverse condition found in modernity up through Kant, mirrors the postmodern paradigm shift; i.e., one can consider Rowlands as giving ontological preference to the semiosphere as opposed to the individual human mind. He can be read as setting up a way of signs over a way of ideas for environmental ethics. Likewise, however, the principles that drive the traditional green movement – conservation, sustainability, etc. – also ought to drive ecosemiotics. Just as pollution of Nature became a problem for traditional environmentalists, so too must proliferation of *more* signs over *better* signs – sign pollution – become a significant problem for semioticians⁴. But the solution to sign pollution must not be considered to be *pure* signification, just as the solution to air pollution must not be considered to be pure air. Such consideration calls forth the nostalgic specter of Grand Narratives. Rather, the solution to air pollution is air breathable by human and nonhuman animals; and the solution to sign pollution must be sign relationships negotiable by human and nonhuman meaning-makers. Thus when Roland Posner, for instance, sought out "a possible means for objectively measuring the degree of semiotic pollution" (Posner 2000: 290–291), he sought to develop a semiotic approach to postmodern ecology. However, for him semiotic pollution is only anthropocentrically threatening: it "endangers the fundamentals of human interaction" and "wind[s] up hindering [...] those semiotic processes originally intended to facilitate human interaction" (Posner 2000: 293). Although Posner cites Nöth's 1996 ecosemiotic thesis as his goal (Posner 2000: 294), he conflates communication and signification in focusing on human interpretation of the conflux of signs. Carefully negotiating this distinction is paramount to semiotic ecology in the face of the postmodern proliferation of signs and simulacra.

Commenting on the proliferation of signs Baudrillard (2004: 23) writes: "It's like a desperate attempt to fill some void, where it should be the aim to find the interstice in the void." Such an interstice between the natural and the semiotic, between the modern and the postmodern, is the survival of semiotic ecology: this is the goal of both Baudrillard's critical theory and ecosemiotic analyses. Baudrillard is at once sympathetic to and critical of the conditions of this semiotic postmodernity, understanding the inevitability of the rise of the simulacrum but also the dangers inherent therein. This understanding is requisite for ecosemiotics, faced

⁴ The language of "better" and "worse" is evaluative and often has no place in the subjective worlds of postmodern discourse. However, many have argued that science – as evaluated in terms of quality and description if not in terms of direct access to noumena – should still hold a place of priority among alternatives. The fundamental scientific premises of observability, repeatability, and predictability remain centrally valuable. See Allen et al. 2001: 476 for a good discussion of this point.

with – like Baudrillard – the postmodern era of semiosis and simulation. The potential of both analyses offers an environmentalist perspective within a simulated ecology of the integral relationship between the ecosphere and the semiosphere.

In this paper I have equated the postmodern with the semiotic interpretation of the natural world, juxtaposing it against the modern distinction between the subject and the object. From this stance, I have shown that environmentalism must be reconceptualized to take account of the loss of the represented real. From semiotics to semiurgy⁵, the postmodern world loses track of the real by covering it up with a proliferation not merely of signs but of simulacra. Baudrillard shows us that understanding the ramifications of a simulated ecology is the first step for any practical ecosemiotic approach to environmentalism.⁶

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⁵ “The word denotes the work involved in the endless production and proliferation of signs.” (Wood 2004: 388, footnote 4)

⁶ Thanks to Myrdene Anderson for her support of an early draft of this paper.

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Симулированная экология Бодрийяра

Жан Бодрийяр, ученый и критик постмодернизма, был обуреваем вопросами об онтологии постмодернизма. Репрезентация реального посредством семиотического процесса означивания находится под угрозой возникновения симулякров, симулирующих реальность. В этой связи семиотические отношения обольщения между знаками заменяют любой традиционный онтологический репрезентатив. Эти вопросы имеют значение и для «энвайронментализма», так как проблемы современной экологической философии имеют свои корни в онтологии. Таким образом, вопросом постмодернистской экологии является: может ли естественное пережить постмодернистское симулирование? Коммуникативный анализ Бодрийяром семиотического постмодернизма может и поддержать и расширить экосемиотические тезисы в ответ на эти вопросы, – вопросы, на которые нужно ответить, чтобы исследовать наше парадоксальное понимание естественного и утвердить понимание энвайронментализма для эпохи постмодерна. В данной статье приводятся доводы в пользу семиотического понимания постмодерна, развивается идея экологии в этом контексте, а затем подход Бодрийяра сравнивается с современными взглядами в экосемиотике.

Baudrillard'i simuleeritud ökoloogia

Postmodernsuse uurija ja kriitik Jean Baudrillard tegeles postmodernse ontoloogia küsimusega: reaalse representeerimist semiootilise tähendustamisprotsessi kaudu ähvardab simulaakrumide, simuleeritud reaalsuse esiletõus. Selle esiletõusu käigus asendavad märkidevahelised semiootilised ahvatlussuhted igasuguse traditsioonilise ontoloogilise esitise. Sel mõttegevusel on implikatsioone environmentalismi osas, sest tänapäeva keskkonnan filosoofia probleemide juured peituvad ontoloogia probleemides. Siit postmodernse ökoloogia küsimus: kas looduslik elab üle postmodernse simulatsiooni? See, kuidas Baudrillard semiootilist postmodernsust kommunikatiivselt analüüsib, võib nii toetada kui ka avardada ökosemiootilisi teese vastusena neile küsimustele, millele tuleb vastata selleks, et uurida meie paradoksaalseid arusaamu looduslikkusest ning kehtestada arusaam environmentalismist postmodernsuse jaoks. Artiklis rõhutatakse postmodernsuse semiootilise mõistmise väärtust, arendatakse ökoloogia ideed selles kontekstis ning võrreldakse seejärel Baudrillard'i lähenemist kaasaegsete arengutega ökosemiootikas.